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Grimball's Point

GRIMBALL'S POINT, LYING AT THE NORTHWESTERN end of the Isle of Hope on the marshes and creeks that run from the wide Skidaway River, is one of the characteristic spots of Savannah's rural landscape. The lowland spreads grassy flats against the horizon; the squawks of marsh hen rise from the long reeds on Grimball's Creek; all the year round a familiar sight is the Negro fisherman sitting patiently in his small bateau or trudging with his plump catch up an old oak-shaded shell road.

A few white residents maintain comfortable summer homes at Grimball's Point, but the settlers scattered on the southern part of the point are Negroes, former slaves and descendants of slaves who once worked the great plantations on the Isle of Hope and other near-by islands. Some of the inhabitants are employed on Grimball's Point hunting preserve, while others are farmers or fishermen. Their abodes are frame bungalows with front porches or little shacks of one or two rooms, but most of the dwellings are surrounded by sun-dappled yards, fenced with boards or chicken wire. Each has its backyard pump as there is no running water.

Of the ten Negro families on the point, young and old believe in signs and auguries. "Catfish Tom" William, Habersham Gibson, and Solomon Gibson professed to know that "some signs sho do wuk." Thomas Tuten, who has spent his fifty-eight years on the island, warned us that "yuh sho has tuh watch people cuz dey kin do yuh." Aging Aunt Cinda Smith, employed on the old Wiley place, is given the respect

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the current belief concerning the necessity of asking leave to enter the graveyard.

"Grant Johnson, he wannuh cut some wood an he git obuh duh fence uh duh cimiterry," he explained to us. "He didn ax leab uh nobody." He wuz a cuttin duh wood down as fas as he could wen all ub a sudden he see a big black dog wut come attuh im. Dat wuz a shadduh an he ain lose no time in jumpin obuh duh fence.

"Wen yuh hab a fewnul eben today, yuh hab tuh ax leab tuh entuh duh cimiterry gate. Duh spirit ain gonuh let yuh in lessn yuh ask leab ub it."

We visited Nero Jones,* an elderly Negro who lived on his sixty-five-acre tract of land with a daughter, Henrietta. Sitting beneath the protecting shade of an arbor which overlooked a peanut field, the old man was busily engaged in shucking a large basket of the nuts.

He, too, remembered having seen harvest dances. "We use tuh hab big time at hahves," he began. "We pray an sing duh night tru. Wen duh sun riz we go out an dance. We hab big beatin uh drums an sometimes we dry duh goads an leab duh seed in um. Dey make good rattle."

"I membuh Uncle Calina an An Hannah well. Dey mighty ole an dey bun up in duh house. Day talk lot uh funny talk tuh each udduh an dey is mighty puhticuluh bout prayin. Dey pray on duh bead. Duh ole man he say 'Ameela' and An Hannah she say 'Hakabara.'"

Later we drove slowly over the flat grass-lands to Hog Hammock, another Negro community at the south end of Sapelo. The red-legged herons winging their way against the vivid blue of the sky, the dense foliage rimming the edges of the inland marshes, clumps of feathery bush, all contributed to the tropical beauty of the island.

At Hog Hammock we visited Shad Hall (Plate XVII),** A

* *Nero Jones, Sapelo Island.*
** *Shad Hall, Sapelo Island.*

A, [See Category 142, plate following p. xxxii-V--Analyst]

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
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malaw, and Edisto islands to Beaufort; down past St. Helena, Hunting, Fripp, and Parris islands; past Hilton Head and Daufuski to Savannah; from Tybee, Wassaw, Ossabaw, and St. Catherines to Sapelo; past St. Simons and Jekyll islands to Cumberland on the Georgia-Florida border—the Sea Islands guard the coast. The coastline is intersected not only by Winyah and Bull bays, Charleston Harbor, and St. Helena, Port Royal, Sapelo, and St. Andrew sounds, but also by many lesser inlets curling around the Sea Islands. Bounded on one side by the ocean and on the other by the salt marsh, these Sea Islands use the energy of wind and wave to build sand barriers that protect the mainland from storm and surf.

The Sea Islands north of Charleston are often older beach resorts such as Pawleys Island and the Isle of Palms. Their residents and visitors are mainly white. Other islands are wildlife sanctuaries such as the 31,000-acre Cape Romaine National Wildlife Refuge, the 20,000-acre Tom Yawkee Wildlife Center on South Island, and the 17,000-acre Belle W. Baruch research facilities on Hobcaw Barony. They serve as home for such endangered species as the bald eagle, the Eastern brown pelican, the short-nosed sturgeon, and the loggerhead turtle. Many islands south of Charleston are populated entirely or primarily by blacks, whose venerable folk culture and vivid creole language are the subject of this book. On the coastal mainland adjacent to the Sea Islands are black people who share that folk culture and that creole language. While they are not—strictly speaking—Sea Islanders, in many ways this book tells their story too.

For two centuries this coastal region has been the home of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Theirs is a sad but inspiring story. They built—in a very literal sense—the plantations, and they tilled the rich fields of rice, indigo, or Sea Island cotton. Some of the slaves were brought to the Sea Islands by Barbadian planters who migrated to the Carolina colony in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a refuge from the overcrowding of Barbados. Many more were imported directly from Africa. By the American Revolution the slaves, from various parts of Africa and from various ethnic and linguistic groups, had already created a distinctive culture. During the Civil War, when white planter families fled the Sea Islands before the invading Union troops, Sea Island blacks began to cultivate the land for themselves. Hundreds of them joined the Union Army in the celebrated First South Carolina Volunteers. On January 16, 1865, General William Tecumseh

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with slavery, the mention of cotton in Sea Island folklore and literature generally has negative connotations.

Today neither cotton nor rice is grown to any extent on or around the Sea Islands. Rice was gradually eliminated by the many disastrous floods and storms which frequent the Carolina coast. Cotton was abandoned in favor of more lucrative means of support, especially since the cotton-picking machine eliminated the need for harvesting of cotton by hand. The primary crops now are edible produce, including soybeans, peas, okra, tomatoes, corn, peanuts, and watermelons, and many folk narratives focus on the planting, cultivation, and harvesting of these crops.

Another major food source is fish, shrimp, crabs, oysters, mussels, clams, lobsters, conchs, and sharks, all of which the islanders prepare expertly and variously. Fish has always been important in the local diet. Consider, for example, a resident minister's account of the varieties available around Edisto Island in 1800:

> The creeks, rivers, and seas which indent and surround the island furnish at different and appropriate seasons of the year, a great variety of excellent fish—as the larger drum, the small black drum, bass, rock-fish, sheephead, cavallie, bonnetta, salmon-trout, yellowtail, ale-wife, croaker, plaice, flounder, skate, pike, shad, and catfish, and many others, suitable for the table. Porpoise and sharks frequent the creeks and surrounding waters. Some of the latter are seen and caught of an enormous size. They are considered as just objects of terror by the negroes. And yet, although the fishermen continue hours together waist deep in water, and have often the misfortune of hooking them, they escape with impunity.[30]

Crabbing and fishing are so much a part of Sea Island culture that many children learn the fine art of casting and netting as early as three years old. Some residents who earn their livings from fishing practice an old African method of netting fish in mass. An elderly gentleman explained to me that his grandfather had taught him to beat on the sides of his boat to attract fish and porpoises to the area (see Appendix 1).[A] The porpoises scare schools of fish ahead of them, and the fish are then caught in the nets. In a variant of this method, a group of fishermen will wade out into the water to beat on their drums or other instruments. The more noise they create above and below water, the more

A. [For Appendix 1, see Category 226, pp. 151-155--Analyst]

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side the roads in the early morning. Opossums are baked with large sweet potatoes, and raccoons are delicacies no islander will refuse. The woods are also the home of rabbits, wolves, foxes, squirrels, skunks, wildcats, and even bears, all hunted, though bears are said to be rather rare now. The islanders have generally been able to rely on a variety of wild game. One seventeenth-century explorer compiled a list:

> Deer, of which there is such infinite Herds, that the whole Country seems but one continued Park, insomuch that I have often heard Captain Matthew, an ingenious Gentleman an Agent to Sir Peter Colleton for his Affairs in Carolina, say that one hunting Indian had yearly kill'd and brought to his Plantation more than 100, sometimes 200 head of Deer. Bears there are in great numbers. . . . There are Bevors, Otters, Foxes, Raccoons, Possums, Musquasses, Hare and Coneys, Squirrels of five kinds, the flying squirrel, whose delicate skin is commended for comforting, if applied to a cold Stomach, the Red, the Grey, the Fox and Black Squirrels.[34]

The islanders, old and young, are fully acquainted with the ways of the local wild animals. Their partial dependency on these animals as a food source has caused them to pay closer attention to the animals' personalities and habits than would a hunter from another area. Thus their categorization of the animals into intelligent and not-so-intelligent ones is based on day-to-day interaction.[35]

In addition to relying on the natural environment,[36] many islanders continue an economic practice which is still the primary method of consumer exchange in the homelands of their ancestors, selling crafts and services along with their game and farm produce. Individual island families are known for "growing" carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, butchers, cabinetmakers, hairdressers, candlemakers, brickmasons, builders, farmers, ministers, and herbalists (or "rootmen"). Family members tend to follow the traditions set by preceding members of the family and handed down from generation to generation. The old skills brought from Africa or learned during slavery, when everything needed for the plantation was made or serviced by the slaves,[37] have lingered in the protected environment of the Sea Islands. Among the skills highly valued on the islands are carpentry, masonry, and the like—essential

505 weekly to bring persons to the mainland. Most inhabitants
[491] over forty remember these Saturday ferry trips to Charleston or to other islands to buy and sell their produce, arts and crafts.

433 Historically, the islanders were self reliant. Rice, indigo, and long staple cotton were resources that flourished well on the fertile soil, and brought substantial prices
[226] on the market. The ocean provided an abundant supply of crab, fish and shrimp, and the children learned the art of
823 casting and netting at a very early age. Because most of
521 the islanders were fishermen, the ocean provided a topic of interest and often evoked many natural responses ranging from earliest childhood encouters to near death feats.

132 Few Europeans inhabited the islands because of the heat
164 and the threat of malaria. According to Nichols (1976:20),
177
136 an important factor in the low numbers of Europeans was their susceptibility to the malaria-bearing mosquito which thrived in the fresh-water swamplands. During the summer months and fall, which consituted the malaria season, the landowners moved to homes on the ocean or further inland. West Africans, on the other hand, had a genetic tolerance for the malaria parasite.

175 During the period from 1730 to 1840, Blacks
161 outnumbered Whites by a substantial margin. For example, in 1800 there were 2,150 Whites and 12,400 Blacks in Georgetown County. By 1840, the county contained 2,200 Whites and 18,000 Blacks (Jackson et al. 1974:33). Thus a geographical isolation, social and econ-
197 omic independence, and marginal contact with speakers of
197 English outside the Creole community nurtured an environ-

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942
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539 191 Miss Beckwith is evidently right in assuming that this form of amusement represents "the breakdown into sport of an outworn belief in the claim by sorcerers to a knowledge of the language of beasts."

192 Discovering an unsuspected connection with Africa in words which sound as though they might be English, but really aren't,[42] provides almost as much satisfaction as finding new songs or dances. Conservative Negroes still retain many of these words—particularly in the old songs—and such are passed on to Dr. Turner in the hope that he may know their meaning. From his *West-African Survivals in the Vocabulary of Gullah* I have learned much that has been an enigma to me in the past, but even Dr. Turner is puzzled by "giffy," which on Sapelo means damp. Years ago I heard the great blue heron in the marshes called "Poor Joe," and judged his lean body had given him his name. Not at all. *Podzo* is the name of a similar heron in Africa. We call a certain type of southern tortoise a "cooter." In the neighborhood of Timbuctoo its near relative is called a *kuta*. When I first visited the Georgia coast I heard the name "tackies" applied to the small wild horses found on the salt marshes of the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia.[43] Now I find that *taki* is the West African name of a horse. The same with the "tabby" houses built for the slaves out of old oyster shells, sand, and cement (made from burning live oyster shells in pine cribs built for the purpose). In Africa the name for a house of similar construction is *tabax*. When a Southerner hears the word "tote" he knows that it means to carry; a very similar word, *tota*, from the Congo, means to pick up. Southern children know the "joggle board," or see-saw, but they do not know that the name comes from the West African word, *dzogal*, meaning to rise. In the old days you asked a colored woman where to find her husband. If she said at the "jook," it meant that he was in the rather ungodly place where drink was sold and good women were not supposed to go. According to the Vocabulary, *dzug* means "to misconduct oneself" and it is easy to see how "jook house," in the Gullah dialect, derived its name. In *Gentlemen, Be Seated*, Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth tell us that Africa possessed an instrument known as the banjar made of a large gourd

[42] *By this time I should be wary of laughing up my sleeve when the Negro uses such words—but white people are like this. My last nugget was found through Mrs. Cate's keen sight. I had told her of the amusing application of the horse breeder's term "in foal" to the condition of one of my singers. With a fresh eye, she spotted in Dr. Turner's* Gullah Vocabulary *the word "en(in)fo le" meaning "pregnant."*

[43] *These hardy little horses are said to be descendants of those left by the Spaniards in the* thirteenth century.

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942
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always attended early mass. She never married; her sweetheart, Ishmael, belonged to another family, and his owners, thinking he would not be worth much to them in the field if his wife were on another plantation, encouraged a match with one of their own slaves.

To the end of her life, she smoked a pipe, and cooked her food in a black pot over a fire in the yard exactly as she had done in her youth. She must have been very strong, as she rowed a boat, did her half-acre of cotton, and, in her own words, "never knew what it was to be tired." She was a hundred and nine years old when she died in 1936, and evidently came of an exceptionally long-lived family, for her father was a centenarian, her sister lived to be a hundred and eight, and a cousin, also born in 1826, outlived her. Janey was straight and healthy to the last, and the sphinx-like, unwrinkled face in her coffin was like a piece of smooth black ebony. I had not realized in life how handsome she was or how Egyptian were her features. The inexpressible dignity of that dark mask so impressed me that I went back three times to make sure I would not forget it.

"BURYIN'"

Old residents of St. Simon's tell me that before the days of automobiles, when even horses [22] and wagons were luxuries, a Negro "buryin'" was an impressive affair. The mourners sang as they walked from the church, where the service was held, to the graveyard a mile away. The singers could be heard the minute they left the church, for at that time "they opened their mouths. They weren't like the young people today—too proud to sing." [23]

The home-made coffin, lined with "paper cambric" and covered with black calico or darkened with lampblack, was placed in the "rough box" and carried on a one-horse wagon. Only the preacher rode with the driver. The men walked single file on one side of the road and the women on the other.

When the minister could not come to the island for the church service, it was not held until his next visit—possibly in three weeks, sometimes in three months. In the days when "Reverend" Andrew Neal officiated, if he was urgently needed to

[22] After the War Between the States only a vicious stallion, belonging to the Coupers, was left on St. Simon's. It was necessary to hobble him before he could be used. There were plenty of ponies, called "tackies," living on the salt marshes; but Joe tells me they were wild, like deer, and it never paid to buy one.

[23] It was said of Adam and Neptun' Small and MacWilliams that they could be heard a mile —than which, according to slave standards, there was no higher praise.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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planters felt the pinch of hard times. A late, wet spring might defer planting until there could be no hope of maturing an average yield before frost. Had the spring been propitious, an unseasonable frost might blight the plant and decrease the crop. Excess of rain or drought might retard the crop or the plant might develop a disease. When the crop was made and ready to be gathered, a storm or hurricane might blast the labor of a year. When the crop was gathered and baled ready for market, economic conditions at home or abroad might reduce the price so low as to plunge the planter into debt.

The diseases to which sea-island cotton were subject, blight, rust, and "blue," were generally considered as arising from some defect in the soil.[36] They could be removed, or at least considerably remedied, by thoroughly draining the land and applying the proper fertilizer at the proper season. But the plant louse, cut worm, and the leaf worm, or caterpillar, as it was commonly known, could not be so easily combated. The plant louse was practically a yearly pest which planters fought by cultivation, attempting to raise a plant hardy enough to withstand the attacks of the insect. The cut worm often appeared in wet seasons and on low lands insufficiently drained. James Hamilton Couper recorded in his plantation book when commenting on the crop for 1818:

> The cut-worm was so destructive, until the 18th. of May, as to have killed the cotton, as soon up, with the exception of the high parts of the old & new fields. They were universally found in the East River Field. It is believed that the Fresh, which covered the fields from the 5th. to the 21st. of March was the cause of their appearance in such numbers.[37]

[36] Allston, *Sea Coast Crops*, pp. 14, 15.
[37] Hopeton Plantation Book.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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The weather not only abetted the insects in their destruction of the cotton crops, but sometimes itself brought ruin. In 1819 James Hamilton Couper was found recording in his plantation book, "In the Spring, the Cotton was very generally destroyed by Frost," and "On the night of the 14th Oct^r. a sharp white frost destroyed about 70 acres of cotton at Hopeton."[41] In 1823 he wrote:

> The crop was set in good time; and was unusually promising until the excessive rains which commenced about the middle of July. These rains continued nearly two months, and occasioned the cotton to drop nearly the whole of the middle & under crop. The upper crop in quantity and maturity promised well, but from the diseased habit which the plant had acquired never opened.[42]

In 1826 he wrote, "This is the only cotton crop since 1818 which has not been cut off by spring freshes, early fall frosts, or gales of wind," and the following year he again recorded, "A very high fresh which occurred about the end of May nearly destroyed the Cotton in Carr's Is." There were heavy rains again in 1828 and 1829, and in 1830 "a very severe Hail Storm was so destructive to the cotton crop, that the failure . . . was nearly entire." With this year, Couper left off recording his observations on crops, but in a letter to his son in 1855 he wrote, "We have had a glut of rain during the week; and as was to be expected the cotton is shedding freely. Three fourths of the Cotton crops are destroyed by the August rains."[43]

in embryo, as the energetic planter . . . has already done." He doubtless refers to dusting the plants with a mixture of Paris Green, rosin, and damaged wheat flour.

[41] Hopeton Plantation Book. [42] *Ibid.*

[43] Couper-Wylly Letters, August 23, 1855, James Hamilton Couper to Hamilton Couper.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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248 132 133 The southern sea coast is subject to autumnal storms which occasionally destroy the planters' entire crop. Sir Charles Lyell, in his second visit to the United States in 1841 and 1842, commented upon this fact, mentioning that in 1756 the entire coast from St. Simon's Island, Georgia, as far north as Charles Town (Charleston) was overflowed, the sea rising six feet above its ordinary level.[44] Parts of the Sea Islands were under water in 1804 and 1824. In the latter year the crops were unusually promising. John Couper had matured a crop of some six hundred bales worth $90,000, but he lost most of the crop in twelve hours by the hurricane of September 14.[45] The next year his crop was nearly destroyed by caterpillars. On September 8, 1854, the coast was again visited by a destructive hurricane,[46] and since the ante-bellum period by two, one in 1893 and one in 1911, which have caused great suffering and loss of life.

248 [136] [130]

THE PLANTER AND HIS FACTOR

The very uncertainty of the crop, as well as the nature of it, tied the planter to the system of factorage so well known in England and other countries long before the settlement of the American colonies. Commission merchants in Charleston and Savannah readily credited sea-island cotton planters who might in one year make enough to pay off the debts of several years accumulation. It was customary, therefore, for the planter to spend his money before

[44] Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, I, 253.

[45] Couper-Wylly Letters. May 24, 1828, John Couper to his brother James Couper.

[46] U. B. Phillips, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society, Plantation and Frontier*, I, 141.